

Documents on Diplomacy: Lessons

From Neutrality to War: Woodrow Wilson's Decisions

Standard: II. Time, Continuity, and Change
V. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
VI. Power, Authority, and Governance
VIII. Science, Technology, and Society
IX. Global Connections
X. Civic Ideals and Practices

Grade Level: 9–12

Objectives: The student will:

- Analyze the path of the United States from neutrality to war
- Discuss the decision-making of President Wilson
- Determine if President Wilson and the U.S. made the best decision

Time: 1–2 class periods

Materials: Documents: **1914** *Woodrow Wilson's Declaration of Neutrality*
1917 *The United States Learns of German Treachery*
1917 *The United States Declares War*

Resources: *A Memorandum on Unrestricted German Submarine Warfare*
Timeline: Isolationism and the Interwar Period

Podium

Procedures:

Pre-Activity

- 1.** The day before the activity, select an uninhibited student to portray Woodrow Wilson. Provide the documents for prior reading.
- 2.** Explain to the President what he/she will do the following the next day:
 - a.** *Dress formally*, if a young man, he should wear shirt, tie, and have a suit coat with him. If a young lady, she should wear a suit if possible—not wearing the jacket until the last scene.)
 - b.** *Be seated* at a desk in front of room as students arrive for class with head in his hands, obviously worried. Could get up and pace, returning to sit, continuing to be agitated.
- 3.** Have a name tag or name plate on desk so that students will know that President Wilson is present.
 - a.** Select another student to portray Secretary of State Robert Lansing.

- b. Explain to this student that he/she will dramatically enter the Oval Office twice with upsetting information for the President. Provide all documents the day before to this student as well, paying particular attention to the Zimmerman Note (1917 *The U.S. Learns of German Treachery*) and the resource on Germany's Policy of Unrestricted Submarine Warfare.

Day of Activity

1. Have two items on students' desks as they arrive to class: the *Timeline* and the document, *1914 Declaration of Neutrality*.
2. The teacher should not conduct business as usual at the beginning of class. President Wilson will begin as soon as the students are seated.

Scene 1: Neutrality and Submarine Warfare

1. The President, apparently distressed (but dignified), should talk as if he is alone in his office. He should make comments about the difficulty of remaining neutral with so much happening in Europe, how he wants the U.S. to remain neutral, etc. Making a comment about the world in general, he should wave the *Timeline* around, saying, "Look at what is happening!" and refer to a few events as students follow his direction.

2. The President should refer to his speech, *1914 Declaration of Neutrality*, bemoaning the fact that despite it being one of his best speeches and the many efforts of the United States to remain out of the war, it appears neutrality is becoming less and less a reality. He should proudly read one or two of the paragraphs from the speech.

3. Just as the President finishes reading from the Declaration, Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, should enter the room waving a message, saying "Mr. President, Mr. President, a letter from the Germans, a letter from the Germans. It is from the German Ambassador Count Johann von Bernstorff."

(As he/she is saying this, the teacher should place copies of the resource, *Memorandum on Germany's Policy of Unrestricted Submarine Warfare*, on each student's desk.

4. The President should read aloud the memorandum after saying, "Listen to this Lansing." Both men should react to this bad news, emphasizing the impact of renewed unrestricted submarine warfare by the Germans. They realize this brings the United States very close to entering the war.

5. The President should ask Lansing to arrange for Congress to gather on February 3 so that he can inform them and the American people of this grave news from the Germans.

Scene 2: The Zimmermann Note

1. Wilson is writing while at his desk. Lansing has left the room.

2. He reads aloud as he writes about avoiding war, that it doesn't seem possible, etc.

3. There is a knock at the Oval Office door and Secretary of State Lansing enters saying, "Mr. President, Mr. President, the Germans are coming, the Germans are coming."
4. The President leaps to his feet and asks Lansing what he is talking about? What is happening?
5. Lansing explains that the British have broken the German code and U.S. Ambassador Walter Page has sent this message from London. (The teacher should place copies of the document, *1917 U.S. Learns of German Treachery*, on each student's desk.)
6. Allow a brief moment for the President (and students) to scan the letter from Ambassador Page. Then, President Wilson will read aloud the English translation of the telegram from Zimmermann, the German Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to the German Minister to Mexico. While he reads, he should insert comments such as: "Treachery," "Mexico, at our own border," etc.
7. Lansing and the President should briefly discuss this situation.
8. The President, once again, asks Lansing to arrange for meetings with key Mexican diplomats, the Cabinet, and members of Congress.

Scene 3: War

1. The teacher should place copies of the document, *The United States Declares War*, on each student's desk.)
2. The President stands, puts on his/her suit coat, and moves to the podium. He should read the sections from the document, *1917 The United States Declares War*. (The teacher should highlight a few paragraphs for the student to read, including the first and last paragraphs.)

Debriefing

- Discuss the reasons that the United States moved from neutrality to war.
- Why was it so difficult for President Wilson to ask Congress to declare war?
- What would you have done in his place? ■